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SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

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SUBJECT: IRAQI JOURNALISTS VENT THEIR FRUSTRATIONS ON EGYPTIAN COUNTERPARTS, BUT DECLINE TO BE QUOTED

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REF: CAIRO 1859

1. (SBU) Summary: At a backyard reception for a group of visiting Iraqi journalists, Embassy staff witnessed a spirited discussion among the Iraqis and invited Egyptian journalists over the shortcomings of Egyptian media reporting on Iraq. The lively interaction between the two groups of journalists was positive in that it increased Egyptian journalists' knowledge of the situation in Iraq. However, further Public Affairs impact of the event was limited, as the Iraqis refused to be photographed by the Egyptians or to be identified in news articles. End summary.

2. (SBU) On Thursday evening, March 31, PA Counselor hosted a backyard reception in honor of a dozen, mostly young, Iraqi journalists in Egypt for a 4-week training program at the American University in Cairo (AUC), funded by the UN Development Program with support from Reuters. Also invited were a number of their AUC professors and a mix of local print journalists. Although the ostensible purpose of the event was to welcome the Iraqis and to demonstrate USG interest in and support for their training, it was also planned as an outreach program for introducing the Iraqis to younger, working-level Egyptian journalists, whose reporting on Iraq to date has been generally negative and critical of the U.S. role in Iraq.

3. (SBU) Also attending were Saad Ridha, the Iraqi Charge d'Affaires in Cairo and Salah Nasrawi, an experienced Iraqi wire service journalist, now working in AP's Cairo bureau. Among the Iraqi journalists was Adnan Qahtan Kareem, a former admiral/chief of the Iraqi Naval staff, mainly educated in the former USSR.

4. (SBU) The Iraqi journalists initially came to the attention of the Embassy through a PA officer who had previously served in Iraq. All were invited via several journalists that PA officers had met, except that these intermediaries shortstopped the invitations to two of their number who, we were told, "couldn't be trusted" not to publicize the group's participation in an Embassy event and jeopardize the safety of all once back in Iraq.

5. (SBU) We expected a lively discussion: "All of us are tired of hearing Egyptians talk about the 'glorious Iraqi resistance,'" one of the Iraqis told us beforehand, "(it's) full of terrorists and criminals, who kill Iraqi journalists! Egyptian journalists should know better." Another Iraqi expressed his frustration this way: "Even after we explain to them how this 'resistance' is killing innocent Iraqis, Egyptian journalists we meet tell us that we are American agents -- or that we don't know what we're talking about. How can they say this when they haven't visited Iraq?!" In the end, we were not disappointed -- the visiting Iraqis were more than willing to vent their frustrations with what they freely characterized to their local counterparts as misleading and inaccurate Egyptian media reporting on Iraq.

6. (SBU) Asked for their reactions after the event, the Iraqis were generally upbeat on the value of reaching out to Egyptians. "(They) listened to us and asked good questions," remarked one of the Iraqis. "One Egyptian reporter had even been to Iraq, and he explained to the other Egyptians how things (in Iraq) really are," observed another. (Note: The Egyptian journalist mentioned went to Iraq on a PA travel grant from Embassy Cairo reported reftel. End note.) All the Iraqis we heard from agreed that there remains great misunderstanding between Iraqis and Egyptians, as well as other Arabs. "Only by meeting and talking like this can we come to some understanding," stated one, "but Arabs have to come to Iraq to see for themselves. They need to think about what the word 'resistance' really means."

7. (SBU) Comment: Even as we hope to have other opportunities like this to bring Egyptians and Iraqis together, we need to keep in mind the distrust the Iraqis

have for each other. As already noted, two of the journalists did not receive their invitations because their colleagues considered them likely informers. Additionally, although they used their own cameras to take souvenir photos with their American hosts, the Iraqis uniformly refused to be photographed by the Egyptian journalists present or to have their names or photos published in news articles. While happy to set the record straight about the situation in Iraq, the visitors felt too threatened to be identified in even the Egyptian media. Although we would have appreciated a wider airing of the candid views expressed that night, we need to be mindful of the security concerns of our Iraqi program participants. End comment.

18. (U) Baghdad minimize considered.

GRAY